

COMMERCIAL STREET TASK FORCE MEETING

PUBLIC HEARING

September 23, 2009

6:30 p.m.

City Council Chambers – Old City Hall

MEMBERS Nicholas Ibarra, Chair; Doug Burlison; Mike MacPherson; Cindy Stephens; Laura Derrick;
PRESENT: Mary Collette; Rusty Worley; Phyllis Ferguson; Mark Davis; Pauletta Dunn; Steve Weimer;
Cynthia Rushefsky; Jim Harriger; and Jack Pugh.

MEMBERS

ABSENT: Bob Pilkington; and Lyle Foster.

STAFF

PRESENT: Anita Baker Climer, City Clerk's Office.

Nicholas Ibarra called the meeting to order at approximately 6:30 p.m., and welcomed everyone.

Mr. Ibarra informed the Task Force that the approval of the meeting minutes for September 16, 2009 would be postponed until their next meeting.

Mike MacPherson, Planning and Development, briefly gave an overview regarding the issue of Commercial Street, as well as discussed the charge of the Task Force, which is as follows:

- Review the Commercial Street Strategy for Success plan and Center City and Landmarks zoning districts to ensure all task force members are provided this background.
- Hear presentations from the various stakeholders regarding the current state of the Commercial Street area, as well as planned actions/improvements.
- Analyze how well the goals, policies and strategies articulated in the Strategy for Success align with the current state of the Commercial Street area and the planned actions/improvements.
- Make recommendations regarding amendments to the goals, policies and strategies in the Commercial Street Strategy for Success.
- Make recommendations regarding amendments to the Zoning Ordinance with respect to appropriate uses, use restrictions and other development requirements to facilitate implementation of the goals, policies and strategies in the Commercial Street Strategy for Success.

Mr. MacPherson requested that the speakers please fill out a sign-up card, and present it to Anita Baker Clerk, City Clerk's Office. He noted that the speakers would be given 5 minutes to present before the Task Force. Mr. MacPherson expressed that everyone please consider other people's point of view/feelings during tonight's public hearing/forum. He also requested that no one "duplicate" the same information that has already been presented during tonight.

Mr. MacPherson noted that the Task Force has a web page available at www.springfieldmo.gov/boards/cstreet, which includes their meeting minutes and addition information, such as the Commercial Street Strategy for Success, and encouraged the public to review the information.

Mr. MacPherson briefly addressed that the Task Force has conducted several meetings to discuss various issues regarding Commercial Street, as well as reviewed several presentations, such as the Historic Preservation Element, to discuss Commercial Street. He noted that the next meeting of the Task Force is scheduled for Wednesday, October 14, 2009, to discuss their upcoming report to the City Council in the future.

Following further discussion, Mr. Ibarra reminded everyone sign-up cards are available, and should be given to Ms. Baker Climer for those who would like to address the Task Force during tonight's public hearing/forum.

Mr. Ibarra requested that everyone turn off their cell phones to prevent distractions during tonight's public hearing/forum. He also requested that the Task Force members please refrain from making comments/remarks during the public hearing/forum until all of tonight's speakers who have sign-up have spoken, unless members of the Task Force has questions for the speaker.

The public hearing/forum was announced regarding the issue of Commercial Street.

During tonight's public hearing/forum, several of the tonight's speakers voiced concerns and issues regarding safety on/near Commercial Street at this time, as well as the need for a Community Oriented Policing (COP) officer on Commercial Street.

The speakers during tonight's public hearing/forum responded to questions posed by the Task Force.

The following is an overview of the speakers during tonight's public hearing/forum:

Samuel D. Mendez, 618 E. Commercial, briefly addressed that he would like to see additional business located on Commercial Street, because sales taxes are needed within the City, versus additional shelter facilities/tax-exempt entities. He noted that he feels that Jim Harriger would like to turn Commercial Street into "The Homeless Capital of Southwest Missouri." Mr. Mendez suggested that the proposed project of the Victory Mission should be constructed and located elsewhere, such as in the "country" and develop a farm type atmosphere to create jobs for the homeless.

Donnie Rodgers, 1628 N. Benton, discussed that the City should focus upon improving the Commercial Street area via the Commercial Street Strategy for Success, which has helped to promote the revitalization of the Commercial Street area. He noted that since 2006 approximately 17 new businesses have been developed/located to the Commercial Street area. Mr. Rodgers reported that he feels that a "balance" is on Commercial Street. He stated that "one group should not suffer the expense of another." He briefly addressed that some developers have "seconded guessed" relocated or developing a business due to Mr. Harriger's proposed project at this time, as well as the loss of the COP officer. Mr. Rodgers also reported that some residents who live on Commercial Street have voiced their disapproval regarding Mr. Harriger's proposal, and would possibly move if the project is developed due to additional safety issues/concerns.

Jennifer Farquhar, 3211 S. Franklin Ave., explained that she has safety and security concerns, such as prostitution and drug sells/exchanges, on Commercial Street during the evening/night hours after several of the businesses have closed down for the day, since the loss of the COP officer. She noted that she was a business owner on Commercial Street. Ms. Farquhar voiced her opposition to Mr. Harriger's proposed project on Commercial Street.

Connie Rhoades, 219 W. Commercial, discussed that she feels that there needs to be a "balance" on Commercial Street regarding the social service providers, businesses, and residents. She reported that she is a business owner, feels that "balance" is a key element for the Commercial Street area, and that Commercial Street has a "balance" at this time.

Erin Frerking, 219 W. Commercial, voiced her opposition to Mr. Harriger's proposal at this time; however, reported that she feels that a compromise could be a possibility. She addressed that she feels that the City should do better at enforcing their ordinances, and should keep their promise to business owners and residents who have located to the Commercial Street area at this time via a "promise" by the City. Ms. Frerking noted that she is a business owner on Commercial Street at this time. She referred to General Ordinance No. 4763, which notes the following:

No emergency shelter or soup kitchen shall be located within Two Thousand (2000) feet of another emergency shelter or soup kitchen, or Two Thousand (2000) feet from any transitional service shelter as measured from property lines.

No transitional service shelter shall be located within Two Thousand (2000) feet of transitional service shelters, emergency shelters, or soup kitchens as measured from property lines.

Keith Wire, 1515 S. Clay Ave., explained that he feels that the growth of Commercial Street and the Victory Mission could be a "win win" for the City. He reported that he is interested in the "future" decisions of the City, and noted that individuals should look "outside the box." He briefly referred to the Atlanta, Georgia area during his discussion, which he noted the City could look like in regards to the outlying areas and the City being connected to one another in the future. Mr. Wire addressed that he feels that private entities, such as the Victory Mission, can best handle the issue of homelessness versus the government. He added that the addition is the issue not the issue of homelessness.

Steve Wiemer briefly made comments regarding the issue of compromise.

Mr. Ibarra reminded the Task Force to please hold their comments/remarks until the end of the public hearing/forum unless a member had a question for the speaker.

Alan Queen and Victoria Queen had originally signed up to speak before the Task Force; however, they decided to decline at this time.

Christine Schilling, 305 & 307 E. Commercial, discussed voiced her opposition to Mr. Harriger's proposal to construct a "hostel" on Commercial Street. She noted that she is a property owner on Commercial Street at this time. Ms. Schilling added that the Commercial Street business owners and residents have been working with the service providers currently on Commercial Street. She stated that she believes the proposed is an expansion of a "homeless shelter," and addressed that she believes the proposed "hostel" should be located elsewhere, such as possibly outside the City. Ms. Schilling reported that the business owners and residents have been "compromising" all along with the service providers, and noted her distrust/suspension of the City and the service providers, such as the Victory Mission, regarding their promise regarding the non-expansion of services to the business owners and residents who reside on Commercial Street.

David Rhodes, 620 S. New Ave., addressed his concerns regarding Commercial Street, such as safety issues, as well as his opposition to Mr. Harriger's proposal to construct a "hostel" on Commercial Street. He briefly addressed several of the issues he has observed regarding negative behaviors, such as panhandling, of the homeless on Commercial Street.

Rita Silic, 1881 N. Main, briefly referred to a letter from Brad Henderson, who apparently owns a Laundromat near the southwest corner of Commercial Street and Grant (near the Price Cutter), and who was unable to attend tonight's public hearing/forum. She addressed that apparently Mr. Henderson experienced numerous issues regarding the issue of homeless visiting his property/business, which he has had to ask to leave due to the homeless harassing his patrons/customers. Ms. Silic noted that Mr. Henderson apparently took a count regarding the homeless that has been invading his business, which within an 8 month period (from February 7, 2009 to September 22, 2009) calculated approximately 237 homeless individuals have come onto his property/business.

Ms. Silic reported that Mr. Henderson feels that the City should keep its promise to the business owners and residents who reside on Commercial Street area regarding the issue of the service providers not expanding their services on Commercial Street. She noted that she is the Vice-President of the Woodland Heights Neighborhood Association.

Ralph Plank, 1337 N. Washington, explained that he feels that Mr. Harriger's proposal to construct a "hostel" is not appropriate for the Commercial Street area due to the area already having issues regarding the homeless, safety, and security since they have lost their COP officer. He noted that he is a Midtown resident. Mr. Plank referred to the "Good Neighbor Agreement" from 1996, and noted he feels that the agreement should be enforced and is legally binding regarding the issue of not expanding services on Commercial Street. He briefly addressed that the letter from Midtown to Senator Kit Bond was to request that The Kitchen, Inc. conduct outstanding warrant and background checks on their residents, which have been implemented. Mr. Plank noted that he did not have any specific statistics regarding the issue of homelessness and mental health at this time.

Grier Gammon, 4881 E. Bancroft Ct., discussed that he feels that Mr. Harriger's proposal would not fit into the historical elements/aspects of the Commercial Street area, and would also "hurt" the current and new businesses in the area if the proposed is developed. He noted that he is a junior at Central High School, and is with the "Students Taking Action Today." Mr. Gammon discussed that he feels that the Landmarks Board should be instrumental in reviewing new building proposals, such as the one proposed by the Victory Mission, within the City adjacent to an historical district, like Commercial Street. He added that he believes that the Task Force should request this of the City Council regarding giving the Landmarks Board more authority regarding new project developments, which are adjacent to an historical district.

Mr. Ibarra commended Mr. Gammon on his presentation before the Task Force, and encouraged the youth of today to get involved within their Community.

Janice Ellison, 1315 N. Broadway, asked the Task Force to "keep an open mind" regarding Mr. Harriger's proposal, and spoke how she feels that the Victory Mission has benefited the Grant Beach Neighborhood area at this time. She also gave some insight into how the Victory Mission operates its programs/services. Ms. Ellison noted that she hasn't worked for the Victory Mission in approximately 1 ½ to 2 years. She expressed that she feels that the issue is how to "handle the behavior of the homeless" versus the issue of homelessness. Ms. Ellison reported that the Victory Mission is a program-based service. She noted that a representative from the Victory Mission currently serves on the Grant Beach Neighborhood Association, and are involved in the Association. Ms. Ellison stated that she feels that a compromise is needed. She reported that depending upon the time of year, such as in the winter, it varied regarding how many individuals would "check in" to the Victory Mission for services. She added that sometimes individuals were turned away from the Victory Mission for various reasons, such as either no room availability or behavior issues. Ms. Ellison stated that she feels that "people need a place to go." She voiced no objections to a development, such as an approximate 210 bed facility like Mr. Harriger has proposed, being in her neighborhood. Ms. Ellison noted that she feels that the "Good Faith Agreement" is an outdated document at this time.

Forrest Brown, 1423 N. Summit Ave., addressed that he feels that the issue of providing "temporary" housing for the homeless fails to substantially reduce homelessness within the United States, and is an "ineffective" approach to homelessness. He reported that the use of providing more permanent housing options would be better suited to address the issue of homelessness than Mr. Harriger's proposal to construct a "hostel." Mr. Brown noted that he is a senior at Central High School, and is with "Students Taking Action Today." During his discussion, he referred to a study regarding the issue of homelessness conducted by Shawn Fisher pertaining to housing and stress levels of the homeless, as well as mentioned the "Pathways House" in New York City as a model. Mr. Brown noted that he feels that permanent housing opportunities, immediately as possible, are essential regarding combating homelessness. Mr. Brown expressed that he feels that a proposed "hostel" being constructed on Commercial Street could hurt the current and future Commercial Street area businesses due to the negative perceptions it could cause.

In a response to a question posed by Jim Harriger, Mr. Brown reported that he has not visited the Cooks Kettle Restaurant or the Victory Mission, and does not know how the Victory Mission operates at this time.

Dean Brethower, 628 E. Commercial, explained that he feels that the proposed "hostel" should be constructed on a campus setting, such as a local university. He noted that he is a resident of Dallas County near Buffalo, Missouri, but is a proprietor on Commercial Street since 1974. Mr. Brethower reported that he feels that the local university should be involved regarding the issue of handling and dealing with the issue of homelessness, because they could help provide counseling services, obtain research, and obtain experience at the same time; however, did not specify regarding the university at this time.

Abbe Ehlers, 1448 N. Summit, briefly thanked the Task Force for their involvement and for serving on the Task Force. She expressed that she feels that the proposed "hostel" should not be constructed on Commercial Street, and voiced concerns regarding safety and security issues regarding the issue of homeless since the COP office has left. Ms. Ehlers briefly addressed that it took Midtown and the organizations who were involved regarding the "Good Faith Agreement" a long period of time to draft and finalize, as well as a challenging process. She noted that she feels that the "Good Faith Agreement" was the right decision, and if people feel that it is outdated, then a new agreement should be made. Ms. Ehlers suggested that additional "monitoring" should be conducted on Commercial Street due to some safety and security issues at this time. She discussed that a European model of a "hostel" is not exactly what Mr. Harriger is proposing at this time. Ms. Ehlers also addressed an agreement between Midtown and Drury University, which is currently in place regarding the issue of expansion and the possible threat to their neighborhood area. She noted that it is important that everyone is involved in an agreement, and on the "same page." Ms. Ehlers briefly responded that she feels that an employee of a business/entity should be "mindful" and respectful of their employer when discussing matters as a representative of a business/entity, and should be "cautious" as well; however, if a situation personally affects the employee, then he/she should step aside at a representative, if serving as an authority figure of a business/entity.

Doug Burlison left the meeting at approximately 8:15 p.m.; however, he returned at approximately 8:20 p.m.

Norm Stewart, 521 E. Commercial, discussed that he feels that the Commercial Street area has "got a bad name" due to the social service providers locating there years ago. He noted that the Commercial Street area has improved over the last several years, such as the litter being cleaned up/removed from the area, as well as new businesses that have been developed/located to the Commercial Street area. Mr. Stewart reported that he is a business owner on Commercial Street, which was founded by his father. He expressed concerns regarding the issue of the homeless, and how he doesn't feel that an increase regarding homeless is needed on Commercial Street at this time.

Mark Davis left the meeting at approximately 8:25 p.m.; however, he returned at approximately 8:27 p.m.

Nancy Brown Doran, 1360 E. Meadowmere, explained that she feels that a "Blue Ribbon Panel" should be established to address the issue of homelessness within the City, which could help "inventory the existing social service programs and the support providers, determine the costs (both direct, such as police and healthcare costs, and indirect, such as "public perception" and "credibility") of this issue, and develop a comprehensive/systematic plan/approach. She briefly discussed that there are cost issues, as well as safety and security issues, involved regarding the issue of homelessness, and that answers need to be provided. Ms. Brown Doran noted that there are a lot of questions still unanswered at this time.

Mark Faegre, 1221 N. Broadway, addressed that he used to be homeless long ago. He expressed that he feels that Springfield has become a "Mecca" for the homeless, and doesn't feel that the City could handle many more homeless individuals on Commercial Street, and the City. Mr. Faegre briefly discussed that he believes communities all over the United States should offer programs/services to the homeless versus the homeless having to relocate to other areas, such as Springfield, to obtain programs/services, which causes overcrowding of the homeless to certain areas versus being distributed more evenly.

Mr. Faegre added that he believes probably 2 out of 3 homeless individuals that he rents studio type apartments to (on a restricted basis) within the City are not from the Springfield area, but are from other outside areas, such as St. Louis, Memphis, Louisiana, Ohio, and Indiana, etc.

Zach Bever, 1923 S. Cedarbrook, discussed that his mom is somewhat hesitant to let him visit the Commercial Street area due to the issue of homeless, and the lack of safety/security at this time. He stated that he is a student at Central High School, and is a member of "Students Taking Action Today." Mr. Bever voiced that he feels that the issue of Commercial Street should be handled in a "proactive" versus "reactive" manner. He reported that depending upon the time of day his mom might be more willing to allow him to visit a business that is located on Commercial Street more during the day as opposed to the evening.

Becky Volz, 1910 N. Grant, explained that she feels that the Commercial Street area is being revitalized, and feels that the area is improving at this time. Ms. Volz expressed her appreciation to the service providers, such as the Victory Mission, for their efforts; however, she voiced concerns regarding the volume of beds for the proposed "hostel" project, and how she doesn't feel that the Commercial Street area can handle additional homeless. She briefly discussed a personal example that she had experienced with an out of state individual who was homeless, and her difficulty regarding trying to help improve the life of the homeless individual, who didn't want to comply with receiving her assistance, such as not drinking in her house, and didn't want to follow any rules imposed upon him by a service provider, such as Victory Mission. Ms. Volz reported that she doesn't feel that she could comment regarding whether or not the "grain silo," which is located on/near the Commercial Street area (if donated to Mr. Harriger) would possibly be a proper location for the proposed "hostel" at this time without additional information. She added that she likes the garden/farm idea mentioned earlier by a speaker, as well as the idea of a campus setting for the homeless.

The Task Force thanked the individuals who spoke during tonight's meeting, as well as attended tonight's public hearing. The Task Force also briefly recognized the participation of the student individuals who addressed the Task Force.

Several of the Task Force members made comments regarding their feelings about the Commercial Street area.

Mary Collette briefly expressed that she feels that the issue of homelessness is a "community" concern, not just a Commercial Street area concern.

Jack Pugh noted that he feels that a more comprehensive study of the proposed "hostel" should be conducted, as well as like the idea of a "Blue Ribbon Panel" regarding the issue of addressing the issue of homelessness within the community. He requested that the Task Force conduct another meeting, possibly next week, to further discuss the proposed "hostel" and Commercial Street with the City's Law Department.

Mr. Pugh expressed that he has some questions regarding the "Good Faith Agreement" that he would like addressed by the Law Department.

Cindy Rushefsky briefly addressed that she feels that the Task Force should "stay focused" regarding their charge in relation to Commercial Street. She noted that she also liked the idea of a "Blue Ribbon Panel."

Steve Wiemer reported that he feels that a definition of a "hostel" needs to be addressed.

Mark Davis briefly discussed that he likes the idea of a farm idea for the homeless, which was suggested by one of the speakers.

Laura Derrick briefly reminded the Task Force that the main focus is the City's Zoning Ordinance and what is best for the Commercial Street area not addressing the issue of homelessness. She reported that she feels that the main objective of the Commercial Street Strategy for Success is "economic development," which the proposed "hostel" could be disrupted and "harmed" if permitted to be developed.

Ms. Collette briefly addressed that she appreciated tonight's comments and the speaker's willingness to participate in tonight's meeting.

Rusty Worley noted that he feels that the issue of "credibility" is an important consideration regarding the issue of the proposed "hostel" and Commercial Street, as well as "keeping our promises" as a City.

Mr. Ibarra thanked tonight's attendees and speakers.

With no further appearances, the public hearing/forum was declared closed.

The Task Force briefly discussed their next meeting, which is scheduled for October 14, 2009.

A few of the Task Force members noted that they would also like an additional meeting scheduled, possibly in a week or two, to meet with the City's Law Department to address additional questions they have regarding the issue of Commercial Street before a draft report of their recommendations has been compiled.

Mr. MacPherson suggested that the Task Force could possibly submit questions to the City staff via the City Clerk's Office, and the Law Department would respond via a memo versus scheduling another meeting of the Task Force due to the City's budget cuts at this time.

Following further discussion and per a consensus of the Task Force, Mr. Ibarra asked the members of the Task Force to please submit their questions to Anita Baker Climer, City Clerk's Office, so they could be compiled and sent to the Law Department for a response.

Mr. Ibarra reminded that Task Force that there upcoming meetings would be focusing upon their recommendations to the City Council, which would be compiled in a final report.

Mr. Ibarra requested that Mr. MacPherson email a copy of the format regarding their upcoming report to the Task Force by tomorrow afternoon. Mr. MacPherson affirmed.

With no further discussion, the meeting adjourned at approximately 8:45 p.m.